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The Wilhelmshaven Revolt

A CHAPTER OF THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT IN THE GERMAN NAVY 1918–1919

by Icarus

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BY ICARUS
(ERNST SCHNEIDER)

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INTRODUCTION

TO

THE 1ST SIMIAN EDITION

This pamphlet "The Wilhelmshaven Revolt" with its sub-title "A Chapter of the Revolutionary Movement in the German Navy, 1918-1919", was written in 1943, towards the end of the Second World War, by "Icarus."

Unlike so many studies of important events in the international history of the working class movement which are written by professional historians after the event, this pamphlet was written by an actual participant in the event known as the "Wilhelmshaven Revolt". It was written from recollection of the events, for, as the author's note indicates, a complete archive of invaluable documents, leaflets etc., in possession of the author had to be destroyed around 1935, when Hitler took power in Germany. These archives were destroyed in the interest of many people including the author himself – who were being hunted by the Gestapo. Finally, it became unsafe for the author to remain in Germany since the important part he had played in the revolt was known to the Nazis and there was a price on his head. He became a refugee in Britain under very difficult circumstances and naturalisation was refused him for many years by the British government and this explains why in 1943 he had very good reasons for writing under the non-de-plume of "Icarus".

Here in Britain, he was only known to a small circle of friends apart from the British authorities – and he quietly earned his living as a ship's painter, working in the London docks. I had the good fortune to meet him at the end of the Second World War, at a time when I had begun to give some modest help to portworkers. We had a common interest in the portworkers struggle immediately after the war during the first post-war Labour government. He took a keen interest in these struggles and his help and advice, based upon his own experiences in Germany, were extremely valauble to me and my dockworker comrades. He died shortly after the war in obscurity.

It is now possible therefore to reveal his name – Ernst Schneider. He was an impressive comrade by any standard – not only was he very well versed in the ways of the sea and, in particular the German Navy, but was also well informed in the politics of the international movement.

Before the 1914-18 war, Ernst Schneider as a young man had been a member of the reformist Social Democratic Party, a sister party of the British Labour Party and a member of the Second International. Here he stood on the left-wing of the party, as were so many of the "young socialists". When the war broke out in 1914, he adhered to the "revolutionary" left-wing tendency, primarily associated with the name of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, which declared that the war was an "imperialist war" and should not be supported. Moreover, this opposition to war was not a pacifist one, but that of the positive class line of seizing upon the opportunities opened out to turn the imperialist war into civil war on the capitalist class.

When he was conscripted he was allocated to the German navy since he had previously been in the mercantile marine, in which he had played an active part in the seamen's struggles prior to 1914. He was one of a whole generation of militant mercantile seamen, with an understanding and direct experience of union organisation. Moreover, since he was also a socialist, his perspectives were not confined to purely reformist trade union activity. It was therefore as a consciously revolutionary socialist that he, like many others, began to quietly build up propaganda units on the various ships of the High Seas Fleet. Their agitation was made easier by the attitude of the professional officer class, which was as Prussianised as the as the Germany army officer class, if not more so.

At the outbreak of the war the morale of the German Navy was good. On the 31st July, 1914, the First Scouting Group and the First Squadron had left Wilhelmshaven to meet the rest of the fleet which was on its way from the Baltic through the Kiel canal. The combined fleet assembled in Jade Bay on 1st August but the warships remained at anchor there for more than three months. It was thought at this time that the German Navy might not have to fight the British fleet, but the weaker French and Russian fleets. However, five days later, Britain declared war on Germany. Nevertheless, Admiral Reinhold Scheer, who was to command the High Seas Fleet at Jutland and who in 1914, was then in command of the Second Squadron, retrospectively in 1917, explained the origins of the 1917 mutinies by pointing out that: "The general situation made it necessary to hold the big ships in reserve and this deprived their crews of the constant vigorous activity which was needed to convince them that they must endure."

The two major strategic reasons why the German high command adopted a cautious attitude was firstly its awareness of the superiority of the British Navy (which had 29 dreadnought capital ships to Germany's 19), and its belief that the land warfare would go quickly in favour of Germany. It was expected that the French army would be quickly defeated and France would surrender, that the British Expeditionary Force would be

mopped up and that the German army would then turn against Russia. It was thought then that Britain recognising the impossibility of fighting alone would then agree to a peace settlement from which Germany would gain her colonial outlets which German capitalism desired. The German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg had indicated that at the peace conference it was "absolutely essential that we should have a big fleet." It was therefore unwise to inflict upon Britain any grave reverse, since he did not believe that the British intended to wage war seriously. This "deterrent" strategy was one of the reasons why a big German fleet had been built. It was intended that the fleet would be so big that the British would be unwilling to challenge it. None of the basic strategic conceptions of the German High Command, both army and navy turned out to be viable propositions.

The German High Seas Fleet, apart from the major collision at Jutland, occasional sorties and the emphasis on submarine warfare, had long periods of inactivity. Ships went on exercises, some went out to tempt the enemy from time to time, but always the ships spent long periods in their base ports, Kiel and Wilhelmshaven, and the crews were constantly being sent on leave. It was this constant contact between returning crews with their families, portworkers, dockyard engineers, etc., which not only kept the crews acquainted with the progress or otherwise of the big land battles the growing shortages of food, but also permitted them to keep in touch with the growing anti-war movement in the factories and workshops.

Ernst Schneider was one of a humber of politically conscious naval ratings who kept in touch with the growing factory committees which began to organise not only industrially but politically also, in opposition to the Social Democratic Party official policy of supporting the war. At the same time the emergence of independent political tendencies also went on, reflecting the intense political activity going on in industry.

He briefly enumerates these seven broad groupings which developed after August 4th, 1914, although some of these tendencies had begun to emerge even prior to 1914, as a reaction against the class collaborationist policies of the Social Democratic Party. Today, of course, we know much more about all these tendencies and the general direction in which they were moving, for the archives that have been preserved have been the source of many studies, both in East Germany and West Germany.

Ernst Schneider was well equipped with political understanding even prior to 1914, but his actual experiences during the war added to and developed his consciousness. For him "theory" and "practice" were combined: but it was "praxis" that determined his political thinking. His political maturity is shown by this pamphlet which was to have been a part of a much larger work. He did not finish it.

He had great confidence in the ability of the working class to emancipate itself. Indeed, he makes clear that the workers do not need "professional" leaders drawn from the ranks of the petit-bourgeosie to guide their class struggle. On the other hand, he did not sneer at theory. He was a very widely read comrade, always anxious to know more, but

always testing theoretical ideas against his own working class experience of the class struggle. His studies were not confined only to those of the German working class. In the short time that I knew him he never ceased asking questions about the class struggle in Britain and other parts of the world.

Because of these experiences, he was an early advocate of workers, soldiers and sailors councils for which he worked consistently and heroically. If today, he needs to be classified politically, he would be grouped with those who call themselves supporters of workers' councils. He would be a critic of all the existing political parties and tendencies, no no matter what they called themselves.

Joe Thomas
November 1975

PREFACE

By Mat Kavanagh

THE IMPORTANT ROLE of the seamen in the revolutionary class-struggle has not hitherto received the attention it so richly deserves – probably because seamen do not count as a voting force, and also because the "Brotherhood of the Sea" is more international than any other trade or occupation. This little book by our comrade "Icarus" tells of the important part played in the revolutionary struggles by the German water-side workers, a page of social history which has been carefully ignored by the bureaucratic trade union officials and the socialist politicians.

The seamen in every age and country have always shown initiative and self-reliance in their struggles and revolts. The Russian Revolution is unthinkable apart from the part played by the sailors of the navy. Their resourcefulness, courage and enthusiasm brought success to the uprising and translated the thoughts of the people into deeds of construction. The sailors, moreover, were amongst the first to see that the revolution had been betrayed. Their heroic stand at Kronstadt in 1921 remains their eternal glory, and the lasting shame and condemnation of the Bolsheviks.

The story of the revolt in the Brazilian Navy is so little known that it seems suitable to mention it here. In November 1910, the men took possession of three powerful Dreadnoughts and six Destroyers. The mutiny lasted four days, and during that time the mutineers had only to signal ashore that they needed food, water, etc. (with the reminder that, in case of refusal, they had guns and knew how to use them) and their wishes were immediately complied with. What an undignified position for the Government! They had to obey the orders of a few hundred sailors – nearly all coloured men, the majority of whom could neither read nor write – or they would be shot. And they dared not torpedo the ships because of their immense cost!

The news was soon broadcast throughout the world, and compelled the Government to recognise what a ridiculous position they were in. So they gave in, and promised to comply with the mutineers' demands, granting each sailor at the same time a free pardon. The Government's move was approved by the President, and the seamen, relying on their bona fides, *surrendered. The Government then, like all other Governments, broke its word, and as soon as it was convenient began imprisoning and persecuting the seamen in the most vicious manner. This episode of fighting seamen has been hidden from the public, and will remain so, so long as the workers rely on the capitalist press for news.*

Even the British Navy has had its bright pages, in its Mutinies at Spithead and the Nore, and its Invergordon. The British Mercantile Marine has contributed some of the most bitterly fought strikes in the history of Labour – always badly organised, their unions being mere due-collecting rackets in the hands of the worst kind of labour fakirs. They have nevertheless put up many a gallant fight against the inhuman conditions under which they had to work and live. Their self-appointed leaders always endeavoured to keep the strikes in their own hands, denied all semblance of power to the rank-and-file. They made recognition of the union their main plank rather than the working conditions of the men. Their attitude towards the coloured seamen is amongst the blackest on record, and one that recoiled against them in many ways, both economic and political. Their denial of international solidarity has helped to lead to the present enslavement of the seamen. Not until the I.W.W. took the job of organising the seamen and water-front workers in hand, was the task handled by real seamen. Then for the first time in the English speaking world, was the fight placed on a clear class-conscious basis. And also for the first time was a clearly conceived plan presented as to how the sea-workers could take over a vessel, and run it on purely syndicalist lines. The ideas may be dormant today, but their resurrection and realisation lie in the near future.

The influence of the I.W.W. was spread to Ireland by James Connolly through the Irish Transport Workers Union. The "irritation" and "sympathetic" strike was tried out to such an extent that the boss class was driven to declare open war. A lock-out was declared against all members of the I.T.W.U. which lasted for nine months. They were the first body of workers in Europe to organise their own army for the protection of their right to hold meetings and processions.

When, in 1912, the dockers were on strike, the seamen showed their solidarity by refusing to work the ships. The masters used the clerks to unload the ships and the union pickets were beaten up by the police. They immediately returned to their headquarters at Liberty Hall, got their guns, and quickly marched back. Neither the police nor the blacklegs offered any resistance after that, proving that only by armed force can peaceful picketing be carried on!

So little has been said or written of the seamen's struggles, from the sailor's point of view, that comrade "Icarus's" pamphlet will be invaluable to the revolutionist. It goes beyond theory to the accomplished fact, and proves beyond doubt or argument that the German is by no means the willing slave of the State we have been led to believe. He is not only a rebel against the capitalist system, but as a revolutionary realist he knows that government is the power that exists to protect the master in his exploiting position. The German worker, like the Spanish worker, has proved to the world that it is practicable to build up Libertarian Communism, and to carry it out on a non-money-using basis.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The history of the toilers of the sea has yet to be written, but when it is, it will form part of the history of the forward storming vanguard of the proletariat.

I, who had a full and active share in those events, consider it my duty, in the interests of the working class, to record the following account, even at the risk of not avoiding inaccuracies so that whosoever wishes, may understand.

Until the year 1935, I had in my possession the complete archive, but it had to be burned for reasons of safety for my comrades and myself. Those documents are, of course, lost, but it is better to lose documents than to lose one's life.

After all, I have kept my head, I am, therefore, able to make further use of it.

LONDON, 1943.

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid industrialisation of Germany, there grew up what was then, numerically the strongest workers movement in the world. Contrary to Britain, the socialist workers' party came into being first, then, later on came the Trade Unions with their thousands of members.

The anti-socialist laws of Bismarck of the last century, did not hinder, but rather furthered the social revolutionary development, though the fact remains, that the ideological development of the oppressed masses has always been far behind the revolutionary technical development.

Nevertheless, during this process, the capitalist class was able, out of their immense profits, to throw a bone now and again to the oppressed. This, and ideological factors has opened the door to labour reformism. The majority of the professional leaders who dreamt of "growing gradually into socialism" became, forced by circumstances, associates of the capitalist system.

The rise of industrial Germany to the position of a great power came only after other countries had already developed independent manufacturing industries. There was hardly a territory left where traders and financiers could establish themselves, and to compensate for this the German State supported the banks and cartels in their fight against foreign competitors. Because their home market was too small for the highly developed economy which they controlled, the German monopolists needed territory and markets, which could be only obtained by national monopolies and State-capitalist expansion.

In Germany, contrary to Britain where international banking was the rule, national finance capital was predominant, which means banking capital, utilised for big industrial concerns and trusts which have a monopolist position inside the country

As a matter of fact, Germany's drive for expansion abroad, proved to be a most dangerous competitor and rival of the older Imperialisms, in particular, Great Britain.

Around the 90's of the last century, Britain lost the greatest part of its trade on the Pacific coast to Germany, to say nothing of its losses to Germany in other parts of the world.

The mode of production and the current ideologies which determine the social-economic formations, the territorial division of the world by the great capitalist-military powers, the domination of the big monopolist combines make a series of imperialist World Wars inevitable, it could only be a question of time.

Even the Conference of the Social-Democrats in 1907, which was held in Stuttgart – even then wholly opportunistic – could not help but come to the conclusion that "Capitalism means War."

But these were words, mere words. The International Socialist movement with its declared Leader-organisations proved itself to be in practice a capitalist institution. Instead of their Utopia of "growing into socialism" they grew, in accord with the natural laws, into inseparable cohesion with the capitalist system.

This is certainly nothing new, but it is necessary to bear it in mind.

In publications of the Left-Radicals in Germany before the first World War, it was pointed out that successful mass actions occur almost spontaneously. This is very true, and history proves it. In this manner, for instance, the sailors, through their spontaneous strike in Hamburg (1885) gained, besides the biggest wage increase ever known before, a general improvement in their working conditions and accommodation.

The same could be pointed out in the case of the spontaneous action of the crew of the giant S.S. *"Vaterland"* at Cuxhaven in the Spring of 1914. Here, the seamen, about 1,300, acted as a self-asserting fighting unit of the working class. There was then no time for needless collaboration between the seamen and the millionaires of the Hamburg-Amerika line, but there was solidarity and self-consciousness of the seamen. In short, the proud lords of the Hapag were forced to give in to the demands of the seamen unconditionally.

Moreover, the example given in this action of the proletarian vanguard spread over all the ocean-going ships of the German Merchant Fleet. Welcomed by the broad masses of the dock and riverside proletariat, again and again, they had emphasised their intention to fight their cause out. They knew that this could not be done by supporting the capitalist forces, but only against them.

The German social-democratic press at the same time – it is characteristic – had, besides sneering at the seamen, little courage ot report the matter impartially. The big dailies in New York however, made less secrecy out of it. Their front pages were full of the bold, but illegal strike action of the seamen on board the *"Vaterland"*.

It is essential to note that service in the Imperial Navy was compulsory for every German seaman. The crews of the merchant fleet were almost

identical with the sailors on board the warships. The rest of the men of the war fleet were recruited from other sections of the industrial proletariat. Thus, they had not only the same interest, but also the same insubordinate spirit. Nevertheless, although their continuous struggle for freedom has been far less successful, the mutiny on board the warship "*Oldenburg*" in the previous century opened an epoch of physical resistance and prolonged unrest of the war fleet.

Without a doubt, the die was cast for revolutionary mass action. This then, was the spiritual attitude amongst the maritime proletariat in Germany in 1914.

MASSES AND LEADERS

THE WAR CLOUDS gathered over Germany. The rank and file of the German Labour Movement, at that time, in numbers, the mightiest movement in the Second International, urged for measures against the approaching war. Crowded mass meetings were held, and the slogan was given: "Mass action against the war."

But words, mere words. The mass of the workers under the influence of their organisations, strongly organised and disciplined in Party and Trade Unions were waiting for the call to action from their trusted leaders, but the call never came! Instead of action came complete political collapse. In contradiction of their previous teaching, the spokesman of the Social Democratic Party in the German Parliament on August 4, 1914, declared, "In the hour of danger we hsall stand by our Fatherland". The majority of the Social Democratic leaders had found their Fatherland. The workers were still without one!

The problem of masses and leaders remained practically unsolved, despite the prolonged struggle of revolutionary socialists such as Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek, Heinrich Laufenburg, Johann Knief and others, whose devotion to the cause was unquestioned, against the then already flourishing policy of class betrayal. The overwhelming majority of the Social Democratic leaders rejected the idea of self-determination of the working class, and worked secretly through their revisionist apparatus "Verein Arbeiterpresse" for the subordination of the proletariat to the bureaucratic organisations. The catastrophe was unavoidable. Many workers felt that their sacrifices had been in vain. They had not understood the dynamics of their own organisation, so they felt betrayed, and they were. That brought disillusionment on the one hand, irritated nerves and indifference on the other. But still things went on.

THE GROUPING OF THE GERMAN LABOUR MOVEMENT AFTER AFTER AUGUST 4TH, 1914.

The split of the Social Democratic Party developed the following various groups:–

1. Majority Social Democrats – Controllers of the old Party apparatus, supported the imperialist war in every way, and captured the bulk of the Party members.

2. Social Democratic Labour Partnership – (Soc. Arb. Gemeinschaft), later called Independent Social Democratic Party – in opposition to No. 1, but undetermined. Supported, for instance, financially, the Left Radicals in Hamburg, but declined to share further activity with them.

3. Revolutionary Confidential men* (Revolutionaire Obleute), in factories and workshops in Berlin. Their policy was class struggle, not imperialist war.

4. International Socialists Berlin – Published a journal "Lichtstrahlen" ("Light-rays") anti-war, criticised Nos. 1 and 2 on Marxian lines.

5. Rhineland and Westphalia Group – around the propaganda periodical "Kampf" ("Combat"), advocated mass action, and fought Nos. 1 and 2 on revolutionary socialist lines.

6. International Group, Berlin – published excellent revolutionary socialist pamphlets and the well-known "Spartakus" letters – distributed by groups 3, 4, 5, and 7. The first "Spartakus Brief" (Letter) addressed to the working class commenced with the words "You are asleep Spartakus, instead of acting in a revolutionary manner".

7. Left Radicals – later they changed their name to International Communists of Germany – had groups in Bremen, Hamburg, Wilhelmshaven, Braunschweig, Hanover, Saxony, East Prussia, and Stettin. Publsihed from 1916 to the end of 1918, the weekly paper "Arbeiter Politik" (Organ for scientific socialism). Advocated the programme of the revolutionary working class on dynamic Marxian lines. Developed the Workers Councils movement. Their call to action in the war industries was promptly followed by the workers. The Left Radicals saw in the blind belief in the efficacy of Parties, one of the main reasons for the impotence of the working class.

8. There were also small groups of Anarchist Syndicalists – revolutionary pacifists, bold comrades-in-arms – who almost joined the Left Radicals.

*N.B. – Since the old terms "Leader", "Official", "President", etc. have become in the minds of class conscious workers synonymous with another class, the German term "Obmann" (confidential man) is the concept for trustworthy fellow workers – respected class comrades.

It cannot be queried, history is made by all, and time forced to follow suit. In 1916, the spokesman of the Social Democrats, announced in the German Parliament, "The peace which seems possible today will leave Germany and her allies in the eyes of Europe, as a group of powers, whose spheres of economic control extend from the marshes of the Elbe, to the waters of the Persian Gulf. Thus Germany will have won by her arms, the kernel of a great sphere of economic control, worthy to be set as a closed economic territory by the side of those of other world empires."

This patriotic announcement was answered by the revolutionary socialist, Karl Liebknecht – at that time a conscripted soldier – at an illegal, but quite open demonstration in Berlin on the May Day of 1916 with the slogan "Down with the War! The principal enemy is in your own country". ("Der Feind steht im eigenen land!") Karl Liebknecht – though an M.P. – was sentenced to 6 years penal servitude. But his voice was heard in the workshops of the war industries, as well as on the battle-fronts and in the naval units at sea.

THE SECRET COMMITTEE OF THE NORTH SEA FLEET AND THE NAVAL BASE OF WILHELMSHAVEN

LIEBKNECHT'S CALL WAS not in vain. It encouraged the opposition forces against the war. On board the cruisers, destroyers, torpedo-boats and other small fighting units, a whispering campaign went on among the sailors, and now and then acclamations; "Es lebe Liebknecht" ("Long live Liebknecht").

Meanwhile signals were given by a secret committee, later known as the Revolutionary Committee, or for short, R.C.

The Committee issued definite instructions, warnings, information and these signals were promptly transferred from mouth to mouth within a certain alliance. No member knew more than two comrades, one to the right, and one to the left like the links of a chain. The first link was known by only one comrade – the Committee.

Under the cover of seamen's yarns in the lower decks, in the lockers, the munition rooms, crow's nests of the fighting masts, even in the lavatories, an underground organisation was built up which did its share towards stopping the imperialist war, and sweeping away the semi-feudal monarchy. The examples set by this underground organisation are of historical importance.

Besides the organisation of the R.C. there appeared some instances of individual peace propagandists who were almost wiped out with the execution of two harmless conscientious objectors, the sailors Reichpietsch and Koebes. Whatever their motives, their struggle formed part of our own struggle, and therefore they died for us and our cause.

In this connection, it is a fact that a representative of one of these unfortunate sailors who consulted some prominent Social Democrat M.P.s, was shown the door. The Social Democrat M.P.s were not interested.

Meanwhile, the unrest grew amongst the seamen in the Fleet. A purge of the crews of certain ships was ordered by commanders of the Fleet, but the growth of the movement was far ahead of the measures taken by the Naval authorities, and the purging was, no doubt, more of a nuisance than a wholesome cure! Suspects – always the wrong ones, of course – were promptly ordered off to their Stammkompanie's (Naval barracks). From there, thousands of seamen were ordered off to the Marine Division on the coast of Flanders.

In March 1917, leaflets written in block letters, signed by the Committee were distributed by the sailors of the 3rd Sailors Regiment. Later on, meetings of the seamen were held at the East End Park. These meetings were of course, illegal, but they were well protected. Without doubt, the underground movement in the Navy did not stop on the gangways and accommodation ladders of the warships!

A Left Radical member of the movement whilst on leave in Hamburg in April 1917, was one of the 18 participants of a secret meeting arranged by a Hamburg woman comrade held in the woods near Gross Borstel, "Sum gruenen Jaeger". The result of the meeting was a broadsheet addressed to the women workers in the war industries and to the soldiers.

Two days later, after 5,000 of the leaflets had been spread among the people and placarded on walls and buildings, spontaneous strikes in the war industries followed. Dozens of strikes and leaflet distributors were arrested and imprisoned. It must be noted that our active friends in Hamburg were all women war workers, shorthand typists, etc., who placarded the broadsheets. Many of these heroines and comrades, as well as the printer, a business man who was not a member of the movement, were sentenced to penal servitude. Our sacrifices were heavy. To mention one's own personal sacrifices would be invidious. A fighter is bound to fight and suffer. To do so the cause is comparatively light. "True enough we must fight for the peace, if not, then it is the peace of the graveyard, the peace that will press down Europe and other parts of the world in a new era of darkest reaction". (Rosa Luxemburg).

Our task could only be to double our activities in the movement on board the warships and on shore.

In July 1917, an example was given by the seamen of a (Commando) squadron headed by the battle cruiser "*Prinzregent*" which lay anchored in the lower Elbe, at the order "weigh anchor, all hands to action stations" some signs and gestures were made by the seamen, but no move was made to obey the order. Their own order "fires out" proved mightier than the orders of the chiefs of the Fleet. Hundreds of sailors were sentenced to penal servitude from one to fifteen years. This event, and the attitude of the Admiralty showed the situation in general, clearly. Flurry and excitement amongst the authorities, but a staunch determination in the lower ranks.

Again the seamen had shown that they did not shrink from armed resistance. They knew that they could only succeed by concerted action by the seamen of the Fleet as a whole in close collaboration with their comrades in the Army and in the industries. Theoreticians who exaggerate the difference between theory and the living reality, may go astray, but seldom the practical fighters. The outlook of the latter was right. In January, 1918, occurred the spontaneous strikes in the armament industries, followed by plunderings of bakeries in the Reich. Then followed months of remarkable silence. It was the silence before the storm.

Towards summer, a meeting was held in the "Edelweiss", the biggest dance hall in Wilhelmshaven. The meeting was protected by columns of the underground movement of the Fleet. It was late in the evening. The dance hall was filled with sailors, girls and a few civilians. The orchestra had left the stage during the interval when suddenly, the great curtain of the stage fell, and shouts were heard: "Stay where you are, do not move!" Then, from behind the curtain was heard a loud voice, impressive and convincing; ". . . we are on the eve of decisive occurrences. There will be at last, no more war, no more oppression of the toiling and bleeding masses . . . but we must fight on, hard, long, and bitterly. For the sake of the cause, no imprudence. Our day is coming."

It came.

In September, a secret Conference of the various groups of the workers opposition took place in Berlin. Representatives of a number of industrial workshops, from North, East, Central and West Germany were assembled.

Summarising the reports of the assemblies that the independent worker-activities were constantly increasing all over the Reich, it was urged that the revolutionary class must violently explain its programme to the broad masses, regardless of expense and, that this was to be carried out without delay . . . Instead of the term "Socialism", the term "Communism" *i.e.* the association of free and equal producers into free Communes, was adopted.

A Manifesto – written by the late Comrade Frenken – in order to enlighten the social-democratic duped masses – to untie them from their careerist leadership, was issued in many thousands of copies, and some days later on distributed within reach.

THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC, WILHELMSHAVEN

AT THE END of October 1918, there was a spate of cases of insubordination and disobedience among the sailors at the base of the North Sea Fleet, and an outburst appeared inevitable.

Warships of all classes and types were alongside the docks and quays of Wilhelmshaven. Major ships including the battleship "*Baden*" and the battle cruiser "*Hindenburg*", were ready for action and awaiting orders from the chief of the Fleet. Ships anchored outside the docks and in the

river Jade – the cruiser squadron, torpedo boat and destroyer flotillas – were also ready for action.

Rumours circulated to the effect that it had been decided to engage the enemy in a final encounter, in which the German Fleet would triumph or die for the glory of the "Kaiser and the Fatherland".

The sailors of the Fleet had their own views on the "Glory of the Fatherland", when they met they saluted one another with a "Long live Liebknecht". The crews of the ships moored at the quayside were to be found most of the time, not on board, but in the workshops and large lavatories ahsore. Officers, contrary to custom, carried revolvers, and ordered the men to return to their ships. The men obeyed, but meanwhile, others had left their ships and swelled the number ashore. The situation was favourable, the Committee passed the message: "Guarded meeting after dark at the New Soldiers' Cemetery. Send delegate from every unit."

According to the rules of the secret organisation, delegates had to proceed to the meeting alone or at most in pairs, and at suitable distances so as not to attract attention. The meeting took place, and showed how general was the response ot the call of the Committee. The meeting place was guarded by sailors. Those present, stood, knelt, or sat between the graves. There was no time for discussion or speeches. The names of the ships moored in the harbour and river were called out, and out of the dark the almost invisible delegates just answered "Here". One comrade spoke, briefly but firmly. "The time has come. It is now or never. Act carefully but resolutely. Seize officers and occupants. Occupy the signalling stations first. When control has been gained, hoist the red flag in the maintop or gaff. Up for the red dawn of a new day!"

In accordance with the rules of the organisation, all had to stay in their places for ten minutes after the speaker had left.

Fortunately, it was a dark night. On their return to their ships and barracks some of the comrades heard the heavy tramp of marching troops. Shots were fired, and the cry went up, "down with the war". The sound of marching came from sailors – some 300 in number – under arrest, who were being taken under escort to the train to the prison Oslebshausen near Bremen. They were warmly cheered by the passing sailors. When a dozen or so sailors were passing the building of the Admiralty, they noticed that the guard house was occupied by soldiers from a town, Marksen, in East Friesland. It was a machine-gun detachment. The sailors without hesitation carried out an attack, and in a moment had captured fifteen machine-guns. The commander of the detachment, an old sergeant-major, after a short palaver, declared himself in solidarity with the sailors. The sailors then marched to Door A of the Imperial shipyard, and upon reaching the watch, found it already in the hands of the revolutionaries. Continuing towards the battleship "*Baden*", it was seen that the small units had also been taken over by the revolutionary sailors. On board the "*Baden*" they elected a new commander. He was a member of the Committee.

By this time the dawn had come. Shots were heard on board a small

light cruiser lying in dry dock, and the white ensign was seen to be still flying in the maintop. After a struggle of about an hour, every ship except the "*Hindenburg*" was in the hands of the revolutionaries. From the "*Hindenburg*" the white ensign still flew. The commander of the "*Baden*" signalled "Surrender or we shoot." A struggle was observed on board the "*Hindenburg*" and a detachment of stokers and firemen of the "*Baden*" prepared to board the "*Hindenburg*" and give a hand. But before they reached their destination, the white eagle ensign was hauled down and the red flag hoisted. At the same time, a signal was received from the cruiser squadron that there too, the revolutionaries had gained the upper hand.

At the orders of the Committee, a mass meeting was held outside the building of the Admiralty. A great crowd of 20,000 attended and later marched round the naval base, headed by the 15th Torpedo Half-Flotilla. A comrade announced that all the commanders and admirals of the North Sea Fleet had been deposed and as long as they kept to their quarters, they would suffer no harm, but if they moved, they would be dealt with.

Three of four commanders entered the Admiralty building and informed the Admiral what had happened. His Excellency answered regretfully, that he could not do anything for the moment. He was informed that for the moment nothing would happen to him if he remained quiet and stayed at home.

By this time, the crowds of war workers were streaming into the streets. It is regretted to have to state the fact that sections of the workers were still waiting for a call from their anti-revolutionary leaders, and had to be forced to be free. Their behaviour, as also was their leaders' and the bulk of "the white collar proletarians" was consciously – or unconsciously – reactionary during this period.

Events moved quickly. Big demonstrations took place and processions converged at the training ground. After speeches and reports on the events, elections of workers' and sailors' councils were held. Every ship had its council and delegate. The same was done for each factory and town district.

That evening a meeting of the delegates took place, which constituted itself as the Revolutionary Government. A council of twenty-one sailors was elected, which was, so to speak, the Administrative Government. This in its turn elected a body of five members with executive powers. But when the first meeting of this council of five took place, it transpired that four of the members were not revolutionary socialists. The fifth member told the others that the revolution could not be made by namby-pamby revolutionaries, and that he could not successfully work with them. Circumstances however, allowed them to carry on for some time. In fact, there was from the beginning, two governments in Wilhelmshaven, the Council of Five, with headquarters in the Officers Casino, and the Revolutionary Committee, backed by the revolutionary socialist seamen with headquarters on board the "*Baden*" and in the "Thousand Man Barracks."

The following anecdotes about two of the members of the Council of Five will serve as an indication of the calibre of the majority of the Council.

A naval stoker, who spoke like a lay preacher, but was of questionable character, and was associated in some way or another with the Admiralty and other authorities of the Imperial regime, and also in close connection with Ebert, Noske, Scheidermann etc., who, on November 4, 1918, when the revolutionary sailors stormed the shipyard barracks, begged his fellow stokers to barricade the main gates. They told him – with a kick – to behave himself. When the gates were then smashed in, he straightened himself, jumped to the entrance, and shouted with a theatrical gesture: "Der Freiheit eine Gasse" (A path for freedom;" a quotation from a poem on the death of Arnold Winkelried.) This man styled himself – under instruction from his imperial masters – President of Oldenburg, East Friesland and Wilhelmshaven, but in practice he kept very much in the background.

Another actor, an even more pitiable member of the Council of Five – whose surname was unfortunately the same as the author's – tried to make friends with the reactionary army of officers who were then appraoching to attack Wilhelmshaven, and had for this purpose large posters printed and put up during the street fighting, which read: "I am not the Spartacist Ernst – who is the leader of the Revolutionary Committee, and I have nothing to do with his communistic arrangements. My name is Joseph ———, and I am a Social Democrat."

This Joseph was punished on the spot by working-class women, who drove him out of Wilhelmshaven with broomsticks. And like the Joseph of the Bible, he fled to another land – in this instance, Russia – and became a wealthy merchant.

THE CRITICAL POINT

BY THIS TIME, power was practically in the hands of the workers', soldiers' and sailors' councils; if not all over the Reich, at least in Wilhelmshaven, Bremen and Brunswick. The revolutionary proletariat pressed for a clear decision. Street and barricade fighting in towns and villages was the order of the day. Shock columns of revolutionary sailors were sent to all parts of Germany. For the purpose of ensuring permanent communications with Kronstadt, several hundred fully armed sailors were sent by the Revolutionary Committee to occupy the wireless station at Nauen, near Berlin, at that time still in the hands of the Ebert Government. They never returned. After fruitless attempts to capture the station, many of them went on to Berlin, and formed, under the leadership of an Imperial army officer, the revolutionary socialist, Lieutenant Dorrenbach – a friend of Karl Liebknecht – the Peoples' Marine Division, (Volks-Mairne Division). Our own attempts to get in touch with revolutionaries in Kronstadt from the Wilhelmshaven wireless station were unsuccessful, our messages were

jammed, first by a station somewhere in Finland, and later by Nauen.

In this situation – by now it was November 18 – the leaders of the trade unions joined the big industrialists in the Arbeitsgemeinschaft. Regarding this, Hugo Stinnes writes in his memoirs; (I quote from memory). "We were completely beaten. In this hopeless situation there came the great man Legien, Chairman of the General Committee of Trade Unions in Germany, as our saviour. He did, in fact, save us; and this shall not be forgotten."

Stinnes did not forget. A millionaire industrialist, and one of the biggest shipowners in Germany, he named one of his biggest ships "*Karl Legien*". If ever a working class in any country in the world was treacherously betrayed, it was the German working class. Were not the workers "ripe" for social revolution? In Lunen, in the Ruhr district, the miners took possession of the coal mines and kept them running for more than five months; the administrative work being done by their wives and daughters. During that time, the output was greater than ever before. Similarly with the farm workers on an estate at Golnow in Pomerania, who took it over and worked it for more than a year as an armed community. Every member of the community kept arms in his house, but no case of violence, or even rudeness, occurred. They had their Workers' Council and lived and worked their estate in peace until Noske's troops forced them back to wage slavery again. These are only two examples out of the many that could be quoted.

Let us lift the curtain! It was K. Radek – the (1919) then Russian plenipotentiary in Germany – who declared openly "a victorious workers' revolution in Germany now, means a lost revolution in Russia."

Stalin, discussing the situation in Germany (1923), urged "In my estimation, the German workers must be restrained, not spurred on."

Indeed, as time has shown, the Comintern has not only bloodily liquidated the genuine revolutionaries in Kronstadt and in the Ukraine, but also has purposely prevented the Wokrers' Revolution in Germany.

The seamen supporting the Revolutionary Committee felt that it was their duty to carry forward their activities and assist their class comrades at all costs. To do so, they were determined even to make use, in case of necessity, of the units of the battle fleet, which though bound by the clauses of the armistice, were still armed and fit for use.

But there were other difficulties to be faced. Hundreds of thousands of workers were still held in the bonds of obsolete systems of organisation, dominated by conservative leaders. This was glaringly illustrated on the occasion of the first All Wokrers' and Soldiers' Council Convention in Berlin, December 1918. It sounds unbelievable, but out of this "revolutionary" Parliament it was found necessary to form a revolutionary group! And when Karl Liebknecht, as the chief speaker, very rightly pointed out: "The counter-revolution is in the midst of us", some of the delegates raised their rifles against him.

The very same day, a counter-revolutionary attempt was made to capture

the battleship "*Baden*". Some blood was spilled, but the attempt was dealt with effectively, and the confidential man of the "*Baden*" was enthusiastically cheered by his victorious comrades on returning from the Convention in Berlin. A few days later, a motor lorry packed with seamen from the Thousand Man Barracks, smashed a counter-revolutionary rising led by landlords of East Friesland and helped their fellow workers on the farms to set up an effective Farm Workers Council. When the detachment returned to the Barracks, it left behind a revolutionary community.

At about the same time, the "People's Government" in Berlin sent a delegate to Wilhelmshaven in an endeavour to induce the Sailors' and Workers' Councils to obey its orders. He was received by some of the members of the Council of Five, but was unsuccessful, and everything went on as before. In January 1919, when the Berlin Government sent one of its ministers to Wilhelmshaven on the same mission, he was arrested by a detachment of the 15th Torpedo Half-Flotilla.

In the meantime, the Berlin Government had printed large posters which were plastered on the walls and buildings of towns throughout the Reich – though not in Wilhelmshaven, Brunswick and other places where the revolutionaries were in control – with the inscriptions in large letters: "Socialism all over Germany", "Socialism is marching on", etc. What in fact marched on, however, were the old reactionary forces led by the people "emancipating Social Democracy". Their chief newspaper, *Vorwaerts* – twice captured and run by the revolutionary workers in Berlin – but later recaptured by the Social Democrats – published at a time when hundreds of workers were being killed in street fighting in Berlin, the following incitement:

"Karl und Rosa,
Viel Hundert Tote in einer Reih'
Rosa und Karl
Sind nicht darbei"

("Many hundreds of dead in a row, but Rosa and Karl are not amongst them." Rosa and Karl, were, of course, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.)

To the Social Democratic propaganda in favour of a National Convention the revolutionary communists replied with: "No National Convention! Arm the workers in the factories! Establish revolutionary tribunals to try the war criminals and counter-revolutionaries!"

At this time, the civil war was far from its climax. The decisive battles came later. New formation of the industrial workers were just marching up to the front line. They fought their battles, not as party men or trade unionists, but as independent revolutionary factory units.

In this very critical atmosphere, December 28, 1918, a party was born, which after long and vehement discussion was called the "Kommunistische Partie Deutschland" (Spartakus Bund), (Communist Party of Germany – Spartacus League). It included only parts of the revolutionary groups mentioned in the previous chapters. Groups such as the International

Communists in Bremen, Wilhelmshaven, Brunswick, etc., never joined it officially. It is important to note that the Communist Party of Germany* (Spartacus League) was strongly anti-Parliamentarian when it started out. In so far as the trade unions were concerned, the slogan at first was "Destroy the Trade Unions"; this was later changed to "Capture the Trade Unions".

Meanwhile, a new independent industrial union movement, known as the "Allgemeine Arbeiter Union, Revolutionare Betriebsorganisation (General Workers' Union Revolutionary Shop Organisation), sprang up and spread all over Germany, its membership reaching in a comparatively short time several hundred thousand. This movement bitterly fought the Reichswehr in Central Germany, at the Leuna Works for instance, and seized, as fighting units of the working class, shipyards and factories in Northern Germany.

In January 1919, I was commissioned by the Conference of the International Communists of North-West Germany to negotiate with Karl Radek – the then general bolshevik plenipotentiary in Berlin – and discuss with him ways and means for establishing wireless communications between Wilhelmshaven and Kronstadt.

I rushed by a special loco-engine to Berlin to conduct my mission immediately. Searching for Radek in vain throughout that day, I accidentally met Karl Liebknecht at midnight who told me that Radek was hiding in the suburbs in a certain flat of the Workers Co-operative Society.

Mass strikes raged in the City and its surrounding districts. No buses or street-cars were running. When I, after a strenuous journey, arrived at Radek's "secret" flat, the latter was occupied with some exciting lady visitors.

At last, a political debate took place and it became clear to me, that the bolshevik party dictatorship did not concern itself with the task of developing the world revolution.

PROSPECTS AND POSSIBILITIES

EARLY IN JANUARY 1919, the situation in general was fully understood by the class-conscious seamen in Wilhelmshaven, who were mostly quartered in the Thousand Man Barracks, on the submarine training ship "*Deutschland*", and in smaller vessels such as destroyers and torpedo-boats. To make sure that nothing should go amiss, the seamen set about educating and training themselves. Lectures were given on Marxian socialism, communism and strategy, on board ships and ashore. Instead of the discredited – as a result of Social Democracy – term "socialism",

* In 1923, the Communist Party of Germany (K.P.D.) pursued a united front policy with the German nationalists. The Nazist Graf von Reventlow wrote articles in the communist central organ "Rote Fahne".

At the same time Clara Zetkin, Communist deputy, declared in the Reichstag, that "a collaboration is quite impossible between the Reichswehr and the Red Army."

the term "communism" was adopted. In close co-operation with the revolutionary socialist workers' groups in north-western Germany and the industrial centres of Westphalia (Ruhr District), a strategic plan was drawn up to drive the reactionary forces from the waterside and south-western Germany towards Berlin. Such a plan it was thought, was better than to allow the reactionaries to fight on ground of their own choice. It was hoped also, to relieve the revolutionary forces locally, and conquer Berlin for the oppressed class.

The revolutionary seamen of the North Sea Station were determined to fight, to win or die, for the cause. They swore that the old class-society should be ended, never to arise again, that there should be no more slavery, no more capitalist war – they had had enough. To describe in words, the spirit of these seamen, is impossible. In their minds they saw a new world-wide society of workers, free without fear of want, a society based on worker-democracy developing into a single unit of mankind.

In the meantime, it became evident that the reactionary forces were encircling north-western Germany. Little by little, their troops occupied certain strategical points, not as a marching army, but as "visitors" and "sympathisers" with the revolutionaries. In the meantime however, between January 10 and 15, the Weser Sailors' Council sent a small torpedo-boat to Wilhelmshaven packed with sailors who wished to fight again, shoulder to shoulder with their old comrades. Together with these sailors, a certain Flight-Lieutenant A. was shown into the headquarters of the Committee. He offered his services to the cause, saying: "I am a proletarian by birth, and at times like these, I come back to the class to which I rightly belong." A, who was an officer in the former Imperial naval air force, proved to be a brilliant instructor and advisor, as well as a brave fighter, and last but not least, a true comrade at heart. In a very short time he trained some fifteen young sailors, if not as pilots, at least as able observers. His skill as a military teacher saved many lives. Other comrades able in command, arose from out of the crews of the fleet, as well as the rank and file of the workers. B, for instance, a former stoker of the "*Baden*"; C, a sailor of the destroyer flotilla, and D, a docker, elected by the revolutionary seamen, who proved to be a bold comrade and able harbour commander.*

The effect of the efforts made by order of the Committee, and the readiness and willingness of its electors, became evident when it became known that an envoy – the third – of the Ebert Government had arrived by aeroplane in Wilhelmshaven to have a last talk with the members of the Council of Five, asking them to surrender Wilhelmshaven to the Ebert Government. The confidential man of the Committee was at that time busy studying charts in the Thousand Man Barracks. From the comrade in command of the torpedo and destroyer flotillas he received by secret telephone – a cable leading from the far-off torpedo-boat harbour direct to the Thousand Man Barracks – the following message:

* As many of the persons referred to, still have relations in Germany and for other reasons, they have been referred to by initial letters only.

"Comrade. The crews of Flotilla B are at action stations. Our 8.8 centimetre guns are well laid covering the Officers' casino. At your order we will fire at once and destroy the house of traitors and its present occupiers. Please give the word."

There was a moment of hesitation; terrible thoughts whirled through the brain of the confidential man. But it only lasted a few seconds; then the order sounded back, clear and decided:

"Thank you comrade, the hour to do so is near, but it has not yet arrived."

Meanwhile, a special messenger arrived from the same flotilla, and he received the same order verbally.

It may be said, that no comrade was better informed than the confidential man of the Committee, and he loved his comrades as he loved the cause. He understood them too well, he knew that they were right, but it could not be done, for in some situations it is not enough to be go-ahead.

On January 15, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were murdered in Berlin by officers of Ebert's soldiery. In Wilhelmshaven a general strike was proclaimed by the International Communist group which had at that time, apart from several hundreds of industrial workers, more than 500 members of the seamen of the fleet. Mass meetings and armed demonstrations were held. On the flagstaffs of the warships and the flagmast of the Thousand Man Barracks, the red flags fluttered in the wind at half-mast. The proletarians of the sea were mourning two beloved comrades, while the murder-provoking writer of *Vorwaerts* had his bloody prize.

Later, *agents provocateurs* sneaked into Wilhelmshaven. They passed themselves off as "comrades" and one of them, in the service of a certain military camarilla was unmasked and two years later executed by the revolutionaries in Central Germany.

Nothing could better illustrate the spirit of the seamen than the fact that when on the following day, January 16, an attempt was made by the reactionary "Bund der Deckoffiziere" (Officers League) "to free Wilhelmshaven from Spartacist domination", the revolutionaries taught them a lesson in fighting that few of the White Guards could have expected. After six hours of street fighting, during which several persons were killed, the Bund surrendered unconditionally. The street leading to the Jachmann Bridge was littered with abandoned rifles and machine-guns. Some of the officers gave a promise not to take up arms again against socialist revolutionaries, and it was later proved that they had kept their word. Whether or not, this rising was inspired by the Ebert Government, the result was a defeat for the old militarist forces. The seamen supporting the Committee fought their opponents openly, and smashed them several times, but none of the officers were executed.

At about the same time, another reactionary *coup de main* was attempted at Jever in Oldenburg, which was also smashed by the commandos of the Thousand Man Barracks. Once more, when the sailors returned to Wilhelmshaven, they left behind them in the Jever district a socialist

Workers' community. But this time they did not return alone. They brought back with them, to put under arrest until things cooled down, a provincial Captain-General who did not believe in revolution. Unfortunately, this man was forgotten at the Heppens military prison in Wilhelmshaven, and when later his brother-officers of the Gerstenbery army opened his cell, and he told them he was the Captain-General of the Jever District, they would not believe him, and instead beat him soundly!

Towards the end of January, the tension grew among the seamen. Berlin fell,* Liel also, Bremen was attacked from the rear by a large army. Although a system of sailors' and workers' guard posts had been organised in Wilhelmshaven and the surrounding districts, and an Emergency Tribunal was sitting to deal with counter-revolutionaries, this was far from being enough. What Wilhelmshaven needed – and still needs, and not Wilhelmshaven alone! – was a full scale revolution from the ground up.

It was clear that this would not be achieved in collaboration with the old personnel of the Sailors' and Workers' Councils, but only by bringing in fresh blood from among the ranks of the socialist revolutionaries of the Committee and its active fighting units on land and sea.

In the economic sphere, the Committee envisaged an association of free and equal procedures, based on a system of workers democracy, utilising – since they would probably be isolated – the gold of the Reichsbank as a means of exchange with capitalist countries, and of course, that the gold could not be used against the revolutionary workers.

The great hope seemed to be Russia. In any case, there was no time for talking; the final moment had arrived for acting – if unsuccessfully, then as an example.

THE REVOLUTIONARY WILHELMSHAVEN COMMUNE

THE STRUGGLE ALONG the whole waterfront in north-western Germany increased in ferocity, and the revolutionary groups, fighting under extremely difficult conditions around Bremen, were wiped out after a stubborn resistance.

* The Kiel Revolt flared up, but as many of the sailors went home it quickly died down. Thousands went to Hamburg where they formed a so-called Navy High Council of the Lower Elbe (Oberster Marine Rat der Niederelbe.)

The activities of this council were confined to requisitioning – by arms – of victuals in the surrounding districts. Unable to lay hands upon the gold of the Banks, they seized – though temporarily – the funds of the Trade Unions in Hamburg.

Through the exodus of the rebels from Kiel, the Kiel Council was nearly emptied of revolutionary elements. And, it was mainly due to this that reactionaries such as the social-democrat Gustav Noske, served more or less as a facade for the military force of the organised reaction. It was from here that the counter revolutionary Ehrhard Brigade started out.

In this situation, the Revolutionary Committee in Wilhelmshaven ordered ashore all available sailors of the fleet, supported by some torpedo-boats that were at anchor, but ready for action in the Judebusen, to fight the approaching White army. The advanced squads of sailors marched 15 to 20 kilometres from Wilhelmshaven to the front line, taking up their positions in trenches dug long before. These squads, each of 10 to 30 sailors, with an elected Obmann, or confidential man, undertook to hold their ground against the advancing army of Ebert's troops. The seamen fully understood that their 3,000 men, with little experience of fighting ashore, would hardly be a match for an army of 40,000 experienced officers, but they also understood that the fight had to go on at all costs, and that in the interests of themselves and the cause, there must be discipline – voluntary discipline based on affection and trust. They treated their own delegates, as well as the comrades in command, with brotherly love and respect.

Meanwhile, the Thousand Man Barracks was put into a state of defence. Machine-guns, rifles, ammunition and hand-grenades were distributed and and stored on all floors, machine-guns were mounted on the roof of this mighty and massive building.

On January 26, at 12 p.m. the R.C. proclaimed a state of siege throughout Wilhelmshaven. The old Soldiers' and Workers' Councils were removed from office. At the same time the Reichsbank with 21 millions in gold was seized, and the bank building guarded by a special troop of 50 sailors and 15 machine-guns. Besides the Reichsbank, all other financial institutions were seized and occupied by armed sailors; further, all statistical bureaux, postal telegraph, and telephone offices, water and electricity works, all means of transport and traffic, railway stations, food and raw material depots, printing shops, and all government buildings.

Trains were stopped, they could come in, but not go out. In five different broadsheets printed in huge letters, placarded all over the town, were given the essentials of the things to come.

Workers, old age pensioners, all toilers in distress, particularly those who lived in huts and wooden barracks, were told to seize the almost empty houses of the rich and occupy them immediately, this was done without delay. There were also many previous prisoners of war, who were freed without any discussion of "different races" and nationalities. Class-consciousness had solved these "problems" on the spot, " . . . it is the social existence of man that determines his consciousness."

On January 27, in the forenoon, one of the stockhouses which was crammed full with provisions of the Navy was opened by order of the R.C. and many thousand kilogrammes of salt meat, salt pork, bacon, peas, rice and tinned foods were distributed gratis amongst the Wilhelmshaven inhabitants. Those in need received according to their necessities.

Meanwhile, information was received from the observers, who were watching the movements of the approaching army, that Wilhelmshaven was cut off on all sides except the waterfront, and that some of the sailor units, supported by a small boat-gun, had already opened the battle with

the advancing Ebert troops. In fact, these comrades were in touch with the officer troops, who rushed at them and lost ground.

At the same time, it was obvious that the hope of assistance from the fortress Heppens, would have to be abandoned entirely because of large scale sabotage. In such a situation, to make use of the torpedo boats in the Jadebusen, would have been disastrous. This then, and the situation in general was earnestly discussed by the delegates at a meeting in the Thousand Man Barracks. As a result, word was given to the fighting sailor squads to concentrate rearwards to the starting point. This was carried out in an orderly manner. During the next few hours the revolutionaries intensified their activities; making some local advances, and destroying some hostile positions in the vicinity of Mariensiel.

Even in these circumstances, the Social Democrat leaders of Oldenburg, East Friesland, were allowed to hold a meeting in the Wilhelmshaven canteen. They had asked to see the Revolutionary Committee, and two delegates of the Fleet, together with a comrade of the Revolutionary Committee, went to meet them. One of these Social Democrats, known as the "pontifex maximus of Oldenburg", had just begun to speak, when his own party men told him roughly that he had better "shut up" when he tried to persuade them not to mingle with the seamen, but just wait and see; though some applauded him, seeing in his waiting policy, the lesser evil, and believing that there would still be time to jump on the victor's bandwagon if a victory should emerge. To them, the situation appeared unstable. They were, without a doubt, capitalistically inclined, and therefore tried to weaken the socialist cause in every possible way. They feared their own shadows, and acted throughout in an underhand manner. This became evident when the rumour was spread that the Spartacists had robbed the Reichsbank in their own personal interests, and that some millions of gold had already been shipped away. Some months later, however, in July 1919, Ebert's "Extraordinary Peoples' Court", in Wilhelmshaven acknowledged that the Revolutionary Committee, although composed of "fanatical Communists", had always kept its hands clean.

On the afternoon of January 28, the first shells of a field howitzer, evidently aimed at the Thousand Man Barracks, crashed into the harbour district. At about this time, a small warship which, as it afterwards transpired, had been in Scandinavian waters for over three months signalled to ask if it might put in to the Wilhelmshaven docks. Comrade D, the acting Harbour Commander, being suspicious of the late-comer, insisted on questioning the captain before he allowed the locks to be opened. The commander of the vessel, an Imperial corvette captain, was asked to meet comrade D on the pier, where he had to answer many questions, being finally told by D that he would himself keep an eye on him, and that if he – the Herr Offizier – behaved himself, he comrade D – would see to it that he got another cigar band to put on his sleeve.

Elsewhere, more serious things were happening. At the main railway station in the town, a battle was raging, many of the sailors were mortally

wounded. A motorised column of officers had run past an outpost of seamen and workers, and made its way to the station, with the obvious intention of seizing the station, and the guard defending it were forced, in the face of heavy machine-gun fire, to give way at one point. Suddenly the car of the Revolutionary Committee made its way at full speed into the officers' column, and threw among them a number of hand-grenades. Eighteen officers were taken prisoner, and four machine-guns, some automatic pistols and a number of naval daggers were captured. The loss of life was fortunately small.

The Obmann of the guard of the station, a tough young stoker of the "*Baden*", ashamed of having nearly let the reactionaries get past him, stood with tears in his eyes as he faced his comrades. But they understood; a hearty handshake, and everything was alright.

As to the seamen as a whole, unlike Ebert's soldiery, they had no desire for revenge. It was war, but their captives were not molested more than was absolutely necessary.

On the afternoon of January 29, a message came addressed to the workers and sailors, informing them that some thousands of well-armed workers, commanded by a well-known young socialist, P. were on their way to give all possible help to the fighters for liberty in Wilhelmshaven.

Who could stand up to the revolutionary socialists now? Many of them thought they could already hear the gunfire of their brothers smashing the reactionary battalions from the east. But it was not the gunfire of the revolutionary army recruited in Hamburg, Harburg, and Bremen, as they joyfully suggested, but that of the reactionary Gerstenburg army. The army commanded by comrade P. never reached Wilhelmshaven. It advanced as far as Delmenhorst, engaged the reactionary forces, suffered heavy losses, and retreated.

By this time, fighting was going on in the streets and at the barricades throughout Wilhelmshaven. Heavy losses were inflicted on the reactionaries, who fought in close column. A hail of hand-grenades descended upon them from the roofs and windows of the houses, and their shouts of "Ebert Scheidermann!" were drowned by those of the revolutionaries "Liebknecht! Luxemburg!" Again and again, the followers of Ebert were driven back, but ever again new officer columns appeared, mostly to suffer the same fate. Sometimes the firing died down, and only single explosions were heard; but then it would break out again, a roaring hurricane in a sea of splinters and wreckage.

In these circumstances, 34 fatally wounded comrades amongst them comrade A, were moved to a torpedo-boat, which shipped them to a small town on the lower Elbe.

Meanwhile, as the night drew on, the fourteen-hour battle for the Thousand Man Barracks began. Among the 588 defenders, mostly sailors from the battle fleet, were a dozen or so workers, some of them women, and, dressed in sailors uniform, an eighteen-year-old girl, the daughter of a naval officer of high rank.

In a very short time, a shell of medium calibre crashed into the gymnasium, followed by others which fell around the barracks. A disagreeable odour, something like gas, filled the air. Then shells began to burst, at short intervals, in the western part of the building. But the sailors had their turn too. Volunteers were called for. Comrade C took the lead, and within half an hour, he had smashed up a column of officers, taken three prisoners, and captured two heavy machine-guns and a 5.3 centimetre gun.

The battle went on throughout the night, reaching its climax in the early hours of the morning, when mine after mine was hurled into the Barracks. Fire-balls and star-shells were let off, and the darkness changed to fire and light. But there was no thought of surrender. Several attempts were made to storm the Barracks, but each time the white guard troops were repulsed by the machine-gun and rifle fire of the defenders. While the fighting was in progress, two meetings were held in the basement dining-room of the Barracks, and at both meetings it was resolved to fight on to the last, and in no circumstances to give in.

But wl ile it is true that the Ebert soldiery had suffered terrible casualties, so too had the revolutionary sailors and workers. There is no purpose in describing the harrowing scenes witnessed during the struggle, only one, shall be mentioned here. Comrade H, mortally wounded, breathed "Communism or death!" as he clasped the hand of the man next to him, and his fellow combatant knelt down and kissed the forehead of a brother-in-arms he had never known before.

It was day-break, two comrades were still firing the only machine-gun left undamaged . . . And from the mast-head of the Thousand Man Barracks was torn down the tattered red flag of the Wilhelmshaven Commune, riddled with gun-fire.

Here ends a chapter – but a chapter only – of the history of the revolutionary proletariat of the sea.

CONCLUSIONS AND THE ISSUES AT STAKE

TO DRAW CONCLUSIONS merely from visible surface facts and general experiences, has only a limited value and does not permit us to see clearly the character of future developments. History does not move in a straight line, the zig-zags are not determined by one trend, but are a composite of under-currents which must be taken into serious consideration.

In each country the interests of the ruling-class are closely bound up with the country's previous history, existing relations, and its particular position within the frame of a given world situation. Any activities, alliances, losses, and opportunities are power and property relations. All external shifts, changes, and struggles are thus irrevocably connected with internal shifts and struggles between the classes, and within the ruling-class or group.

No doubt, all previous existing ruling groups have hindered the development of a truly social production and distribution. The key to the understanding of history lies in the historical development of labour.

The class-struggle alone will be the decisive and determining factor, with its highest point – the revolution. The latter is a matter of tactics.

As we have seen, in the practical field of revolutionary and social activities, the political parties are no better informed than the masses. This has been proved in all actual revolutionary struggles. As long as parties operate as separate groups within the mass, the mass is not revolutionary, but neither are the parties. They can only function as capitalist appendages.

The fact remains, the liberation of the working class, can only be carried out by the working class itself.

Since the teachings of Marx, Bakunin, and others, many shifts and changes have taken place in the political, economic and social spheres. There are no such things as eternal values.

It is therefore, not enough to merely repeat the teachings and timely truths of our pioneers and advisors, we must develop them and carry them out.

The period when Capitalism was advancing is past, and with it the basis of the old forms of organisation. Every epoch has its own forms of organisation, which are significant for the onward movement of that same period in the course of development, however, with the beginnings of a new period, the old organisational forms hamper more and more the new development. The older forms which were used as a means of progress in the beginning of a particular period, become at the end of that same period a hampering factor, and their effect is highly reactionary.

The time of the still – in some parts of the world – existing capitalistic labour organisation is obviously past. New conditions must be met with new forms of organisations and methods and with the least possible delay. The workers themselves, organised as a revolutionary class must act. The workers must be the masters, not the servants of their own organisations.

The working class is in need of a movement which will closely trace the paths of the laws of motion. An entirely new movement based on working class solidarity, unification on the job, free and independent workers councils in cadres of self-asserting fighting units, based on ships, rail, aircraft, workshops, pits, factories and agricultural communities.

The workers do not require professional leaders, our confidential men shall be class-conscious comrades and teachers only, dismissable at any time by a vote of their direct electors.

We have no ready-made blue-prints of the near future, but we will dare to predict that the present world-war will inevitably end with a deeper economic and social crisis with revolutionary consequences. The self-acting workers of Europe, freed from the ties of outmoded organisational forms, will not wait for the call of professional party leaders. There will be at anyrate a true revolutionary working class movement on the European Continent.

The merest glance at this map will show Wilhelmshaven with its beleagured coastline, and therefore the cramped position and difficult conditions of the revolutionary Seamen in 1919.

EPILOGUE

I CANNOT END my story without regarding the present state of affairs in the ranks of the German workers, which is of the greatest interest to the anti-nationalist working class as a whole.

It is quite true, the German labouring masses tied to an outmoded system and under the pressure of a careerist leader dictatorship have lost its long and bloody revolutionary battles. But so have until now the great masses in all countries. In fact, the German working class in general, though tortured with terrible suffering, is – contrary to the nationalistic idiocy – free from any kind of race hatred, nationalism, and so-called patriotism.

Nevertheless, they knew that they have – under conditions which often were the logical outcome of their own activities – failed to defeat "Fascism" and that they therefore strive to value the arguments of their class-conscious fellow workers abroad. But they cannot be expected to change their present nationalistic hangman for another nationalistic hangman.

Equipped with an empirically organised underground network, using continually changing methods, the German revolutionary workers are trying their utmost to inform the masses as to just what is going on, so that they will more readily understand the true situation. These fellow workers cannot be fooled by any nationalistic propaganda. They are aware that to destroy "Fasicsm" – which is more or less the ruling form of the capitalist powers today – the workers of all lands must destroy capitalism, and that this can be achieved only on the basis of true working class solidarity. The time is not far away, when it cannot be ignored any longer, that considerable parts of the German working class have resolutely fought for the great cause, and are even in the time of the darkest reaction still fighting in the forefront of the revolutionary proletariat.

Let the nationalists, who are surely the last to be entitled to throw stones at anyone, shout spreading their lies and mockery at the *real* fighters for freedom, this will only strengthen and raise the spirits of the anti-nationalist forces and, in process of time remove the scum of human community.

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